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ABSTRACT

Research was conducted to gain insight into both the facilitators of consciousness-raising and the nature of this emancipatory process. Consciousness-raising was defined as a transformation of consciousness in which individuals experience critical reflection and action that develops a deepened consciousness of their situation leading them to understand that situation as a historical reality that can be changed. The sample consisted of 24 white middle-class women who had experienced a transformation of consciousness related to women's issues and were acting for structural change of society through communications, politics, religion, or education. The women were identified through books and journals and networking. Data gathered through open-ended interviews suggest that for these women the primary transformative learning within Consciousness-raising was learning to center their knowing process within their own experience. This process occurred through an envisioning process as a factor in change agents' commitment to act for social change. The primary learning these women experienced was a transformation of themselves as knowers. They spoke of previously being alienated in their knowing and assuming a passive role by internalizing others' definitions of reality. They changed this perception primarily through discussion with other women and began to take a more active role in their own lives. The implications of the findings for educational practice include the importance of attending to the primacy of experience, the diversity of knowing, and the exercise of imagination and choice to design learning experiences that are relevant to learners. (Contains 14 references.) (KC)

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IMAGINATION & TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Kathleen A. Loughlin

Research suggests that an envisioning process may be a significant dynamic in change agents' commitment-making to act for social reconstruction. This paper analyzes that finding which emerged in a qualitative study of women change agents and their consciousness-raising (Loughlin, 1993). The discussion begins with an overview of the study and methodology. The second section identifies the transformative learning that facilitated these women's envisioning process, followed by an exploration of that vision-making process. Lastly, the implications of this finding for educational practice are suggested.

OVERVIEW OF STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research was to gain insight into both the facilitators of consciousness-raising and the nature of this emancipatory process (Hart 1985, 1990; Mezirow, 1990, 1991). Consciousness-raising was defined as a transformation of consciousness in which individuals experience a praxis--critical reflection and action--that develops "a deepened consciousness of their situation" leading them "to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation" (Freire, 1982, p. 73). The emancipatory dimension of this process is individuals' "release from dependence upon seemingly natural constraints and mystifications" in their knowing (Greene, 1990, p. 262).

The sample consisted of twenty-four Caucasian middle- class women who had experienced a transformation of consciousness related to women's issues. The criteria for selection included each

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woman's possessing a reflective awareness of her individual consciousness-raising process and an ability to articulate that process. Additionally, each woman was acting for structural change of society through the fields of communications, politics, religion, or education. The researcher used public sources, such as books and journals, and networking to identify the women. After an initial contact with a potential participant, the researcher sent her a description of the study's purpose and the criteria for the sample. Thus, participant judgment facilitated selection. Lastly, the interview schedule probed for a transformation of consciousness within an emancipatory process as an additional guarantee that the women reflected the criteria of the study.

Data was gathered using a field-tested semi-structured open-ended interview schedule. Structured questions were designed around the topics: perceptions of self, before and after consciousness-raising; catalytic events related to consciousness-raising; and formal and informal learning experiences that facilitated the transformation of consciousness.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using a modified form of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To ensure credibility, the techniques of peer debriefing and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were used.

The findings suggest that for these women the primary transformative learning within consciousness-raising was learning to center their knowing process within their own experience (Cell,

1984). While the study disclosed other findings related to the nature of transformative learning within the emancipatory process and its facilitators, this paper focuses on a specific finding: the envisioning process as a dynamic in change agents' commitment-making to act for social change. To provide context for understanding this finding, the transformative learning that contributed to the envisioning process is discussed first.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AND THE ENVISIONING PROCESS

While each woman in the study detailed unique learning experiences within her consciousness-raising, the primary learning these women experienced was a transformation in their understanding of themselves as knowers. Specifically, they spoke of previously being alienated in their knowing and assuming a passive role by internalizing others' definitions of reality. When speaking of themselves as knowers, words such as "marginal," "outsider," and "impostor" dominated their descriptions.

For example Tina, a woman in her forties who is an activist for the rights of incarcerated women, spoke clearly of her alienation. "I think the best way that I can identify it is that I was a 100% success model of what it meant to be a socialized female . . . I bought everything . . . I was trying to become something other and I was going through contortions. I tried to be something outside my own experience."

Similar to the other women in the study, Tina's transformation in knowing emerged in part through her empathic

discussions with other women. In particular, she and an African-American woman "talked a lot about what it meant to be black and white." Tina recalled, "We struggled and she was probably most influential for me . . . That particular issue of racism helped me to come close to my own identification of feeling oppressed. Somehow they are very connected. I understood my own." Through developing empathic relationships with other women in which they reflected on their experiences, Tina began to critique societal norms and structures from her own perspective. The critique, affirmation, and support she experienced helped her "identify what was going on in" her life. As a knower, Tina recalled "[I came] to trust my experiences more than I ever did before. I just believe that I am capable of things that I probably never thought I had before." For the other women and Tina, this sense of agency in constructing their own knowledge became an emerging characteristic of their understanding of themselves as knowers.

This transformation from alienation in knowing to agency, therefore, was characterized by each woman's centering her knowing in her own unique experiences. Adrienne, a leader for radical reform within the Catholic Church, described the beginnings of her centering.

> Almost the sense of being a unique person--that's probably the biggest change for me in consciousness- raising. That I wasn't one of many. That somehow I had a unique gift to offer . . . Almost as if I had a sense of my personhood . . . . I think that's something that slowly grew in me and is still growing. The way I respond to it today is almost a growing

> sense of my own authority. That indeed I have a certain amount of authority--the authoring of one's life.

This awareness of the possibility of authorship, of being the creator of one's life and knowledge emerged as a pivotal insight for each of the women in their transformation. Patricia, a feminist philosopher and writer, recalls this recognition in relation to the academy. "I sort of moved outside the academic world, and rather than feeling that I had failed at it, I began that slow process to say that it was failing women." She continued: "I began to try to develop a perspective--though it is feminist--it is somehow rooted in the life I lead as a woman, which I had previously thought that the whole problem was that I was too caught up in that life as a woman."

For Tina--who came to trust her experiences, for Adrienne--who discovered a sense of uniqueness, for Patricia--who embraced the life she led as a woman, and for the other women in the study, each began to assume the role of author in relation to the known (Kegan, 1982). This experience of authorship made possible a knowing centered in authenticity, a knowing where one can "experience things in their 'true' relation to oneself instead of in a manipulative, exploitative, or dependent fashion" (Baumeister, 1986, p. 93).

To summarize, this transformative learning involved a movement from alienation to agency in knowing. This sense of agency was manifested by centering knowing in one's unique experiences. This

centering, thus, transformed the relationship between the knower and the known to one in which the woman became "author" and the knowledge created reflected her authenticity. It was this centered and authentic knowing which made the envisioning process possible.

THE ENVISIONING PROCESS AND COMMITMENT-MAKING

Each woman's personal transformation to a centered knowing created the opportunity not only to be the author of her knowing, but also to connect that knowing to public issues with a corresponding critique of the societal norms and structures--the first step in the envisioning process. Similar to Tina's experience discussed earlier, Miriam, a political scientist and author, spoke of this connection and her corresponding critique.

> I suppose the major change is the recognition that there were certain kinds of issues, questions, and problems that come up over and over again for lots of women, not just myself, in terms of conflict between devotion to your children, your intimate life, as well as one's desire to be a public person in whatever way you defined that. That these were deep conflicts we shared, that they were deep and they weren't easily solved. There were real issues--there were structural questions in terms of how the world was organized that imposed these questions.

This ability to identify the underlying structural causes of societal oppression was manifested by each woman. Similar to the other women in the study, Patricia, philosopher and author, also judged the societal influence on women's experience as "far more complicated. I see it as a world that has been created against the interest of women and against things I care very much about and they [militaristic systems] therefore have to be changed."

The distinguishing characteristic that accompanied these

women's awareness of oppression was their willingness and inner freedom to imagine, to see an opening beyond that oppression, a vision of a transformed society--the second step in the envisioning process. As Greene (1978) writes: "Freedom has everything to do with the capacity to identify openings in situations, possible courses of action. It signifies individual choosing in the light of the spontaneous preferences that compose each person's individuality" (p. 245).

For Miriam, this capacity to imagine and see an opening beyond the traditional methodologies of political science "that looked at human beings and then systematically excluded some kinds of questions. And that in a sense I was obliged to go forth and fight, fight this stuff." It was her commitment to realizing her vision of inclusiveness in addressing the social inequities of all that motivated her action--the final step of the envisioning process. She stated, "I believe that transformation in the way we think and write and do scholarship is doing structural change. It offers all kinds of possibilities." Concretely, her commitment to realize her vision motivated her to include in her scholarship "the voices of people who don't have access to the media or don't like books and those who aren't quoted in the New York Times and all of that. Human beings with complicated lives, sometimes desperate lives and so on. So I would say I'm more in tune with them."

In like manner, Patricia acknowledged that the oppressive structures of militarism within contemporary society "have to be

changed," and she, thus, imagined a world community in a harmonious relationship. It was commitment to realizing this vision that motivated her action. She detailed, "My interest in structural change in society is very much tied to peace politics. And in the book I'm writing it involves feminist peace politics . . . and I think that feminist peace politics can make a distinctive contribution, and I see myself doing it in a very tiny way in helping to develop peace politics."

The envisioning process described by Miriam and Patricia also characterized the experience of all participants in the study. Each connected her personal knowledge to public issues with a corresponding critique. This awareness was accompanied by her willingness and inner freedom to imagine, to see an opening beyond that oppression, a vision of a transformed society founded in the values of fostering "preservation, growth and acceptability" [in a humanistic sense] (Ruddick, 1980, p. 359). Lastly, each developed a commitment to realize this vision which motivated action.

In summary, the women in this study were able "to transcend passivity" (Greene, 1978, p. 2) and alienation in knowing through centering their knowing in authenticity. This transformation in knowing, then, facilitated an envisioning process characterized by critique, imagination, and commitment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

The insights which these women shared into the learning that leads to agency and an envisioning process suggest several

implications. Of these, reflection on personal experience is an essential dynamic of a transformative learning process. We, as adult educators, acknowledge the relevance of including learners' experience into the educational encounter. This study, however, suggests the primacy of reflecting on experience as an essential dynamic of the learning process. Furthermore, facilitating explorations into the interconnections between individuals' experiences and societal norms and structures can provide a context for developing informed opinions about public policy and decision-making.

Another implication for practice is the importance of designing opportunities to explore the diverse ways of knowing which individuals use to make meaning of their life experiences. Within these discussions, attention to individualized styles of knowing and learning can lead to an empathic understanding of the differences between individuals, as well as the similarities that unite them.

Also, this study suggests the importance of fostering the use of learners' imagination and providing opportunities for choice. For example, the introduction of the arts into the educational encounter can sensitize and broaden understanding of others' realities through exercising imagination and choice. Additionally, incorporating opportunities for meaningful choice in solving contemporary societal problems which reach out into the local community can challenge learners' imaginations and creativity.

While other implications for practice might be offered, the importance of attending to the primacy of experience, the diversity of knowing, the exercise of imagination and choice appears to be intimately connected to these women's emancipatory process. It remains a continuing challenge to adult educators to design learning experiences that reflect these qualities.

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